

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# A SEABIRD SANCTUARY PROTECTION ISLAND

*In Puget Sound, at the mouth of Discovery Bay, lies a small jewel of an island, a unique hunk of dirt and rock called Protection Island.*

by Janet O'Mara



*Black oystercatchers lay their buff-colored eggs in a pebble-lined hollow on the beach. There are 15-20 nesting pairs on Protection Island.*

ROGER AND DONNA AITKENHEAD

It was a sunny day in July when this magazine's editor, Janet O'Mara, and photographer, Darrell Gulin, were taken over to Protection Island by two Department of Game Area Biologists, Eric Cummins and Anita McMillan, and Wildlife Agent Mike Ragon. Eric and Mike have been involved with the management and preservation of Protection Island for many years, both as private citizens and as Department employees. Anita is a relative newcomer to the arch. All three of them deeply enjoy and respect the uniqueness of the island's habitat and wildlife and all three spent several hours helping us understand what they have learned.

*Protection Island is a very special place.*

Protection Island's beauty and importance to wildlife is not immediately obvious—from the lush mainland, only one and a half miles away, it looks rather barren. Shaped like a plump arrowhead with elongated spits on two sides, the 400-acre island is covered with weeds and grasses and a few trees. Silver-gray driftwood is heaped on its beaches.

As your boat comes closer, however, the island's rugged beauty and abundant wildlife hold your attention and you begin to understand. Auklets and puffins swim by, harbor seals pop up in the water for a look, thousands of seabirds and gulls nest on the high cliffs and in burrows in the steep bluff. Further inland, a pair of bald eagles nests in the trees and several kinds of swallows swoop and turn overhead. Northern harriers, peregrine falcons, sparrows, wrens, meadowlarks, western tanagers, warblers, hummingbirds and (introduced) ring-necked pheasants are all there too.

You really begin to appreciate the island's importance to wildlife when you hear from Eric Cummins, Department of Game Nongame

RHINOCEROS AUKLET BY ULRICK WILSON





Biologist, that 70 percent of all seabirds nesting in the inland waters of Washington nest on Protection Island!

It is one of the seven major rhinoceros auklet colonies in the world, home to half of the Washington population. The large number of pigeon guillemots nesting under the driftwood on the island form the densest nesting colony in the entire state. There are 30-40 nesting pairs of tufted puffins, in burrows near the top of the cliffs, the largest colony east of Cape Flattery.

In addition, there are fifteen to 20 nesting pairs of black oystercatchers on the beaches, hundreds and hundreds of pairs of pelagic and double-crested cormorants that nest on cliff ledges, and several thousand glaucous-winged gulls, the largest nesting colony in Washington.

Marine mammals also make good use of the island. Violet Spit on the east side of the island is a pup area—"and there aren't many in Puget Sound," Cummins notes—and gray whales have been sighted offshore.

In fact, "every marine bird in this area at some time or another spends time on or near this island," says Cummins, "almost every species of gull and sea bird that ever even visits Puget Sound." It isn't unusual, for example, to see great rafts (groups) of harlequin ducks of as many as 200 or more at a time.

Obviously, it is indeed an important area for wildlife. But it is people who have carved its checkered past. The island has seen every kind of human intrusion and controversy—kind, respectful, professional, well-meaning, thoughtless and downright dangerous to wildlife survival.

Protection Island was privately owned for years, with activities ranging from a gun club to farming, and many of those activities caused extreme disruption—or destruction—of delicate wildlife habitat.

In 1968, the entire island was platted as a recreational subdivision. Over 1,000 lots were nationally advertised. Only after several hundred were sold was it discovered that the water on the island was unsafe, and the county was forced to put a moratorium on further development. Mike Ragon, Department of Game Wildlife Agent, and Richard Lichtenberg, USFWS Enforcement Agent, managed to stop bulldozers from destroying habitat in the late 1960s. It was at that point that the Department of Game and the environmental community intensified their efforts to protect the island's wildlife.

In 1972, the Washington Department of Game, with the assistance of the Nature Conservancy and the Inter-Agency Committee for Outdoor Recreation, purchased the west end of the island, some 48 acres. It was later designated the Zella M. Schultz Seabird Sanctuary in memory of the well-known Washington ornithologist and painter. The rest of the island was designated a National Wildlife Refuge in 1982. Under a federal agreement, the remaining part of the island will continue to be sparsely inhabited by private residents for a number of years.

The importance of the Seabird Sanctuary cannot be overstated. While it comprises only 15 percent of the total island area, it supports over 30 percent of the seabirds nesting on Protection Island. Management goals of the Seabird Sanctuary are to protect the wildlife, leave the site in a natural condition, provide public education without disturbing wildlife populations, allow reasonable research as long as it is not detrimental to wildlife, and manage the sanctuary with minimum cost, maintenance and supervision.

The sanctuary is closed to the public March to September so habitat can be protected and so that seals and nesting seabirds will not be disturbed. An interpretative program may be implemented in the future and further controlled human access may be allowed.

Whatever is decided, the important point is that now that the island's wildlife inhabitants are safe and secure, state and federal agencies have the time to do further research and to formulate the best possible plan for this unique hunk of land in Puget Sound. WW



DARRELL GULIN





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(top) The pigeon guillemot is a small, black and white seabird (Alcidae) with bright red feet. Its takeoffs and landings are sometimes bumpy, but it swims and dives expertly.

(below left) Spotted, olive brown eggs of the glaucous-winged gull, which nests in the dried weeds and grasses on the rolling top of the island.

(left) The Zella M. Schultz Seabird Sanctuary on the west end of the island





